General strike paralyzes Catalonia as over half-a-million demonstrate in Barcelona

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Yesterday, on the fifth day of protests and riots after the draconian ruling that sentenced nine Catalan nationalist politicians to nine to 13 years in prison, hundreds of thousands of protesters marched through Barcelona and a general strike paralyzed Catalonia. Broad sections of youth and workers mobilized to protest the police state that is emerging in Spain and more broadly across Europe.

During the morning, five columns of thousands of protesters, organized by the Catalan National Assemby and Òmnium Cultural under the slogan "Freedom March," blocked highways leading to Barcelona. The columns started in Vic, Berga, Tàrrega, Girona and Tarragona and converged on Barcelona during the afternoon, where tens of thousands more had assembled. Protesters carried a giant banner reading, in English: "Free Catalan Prisoners Now."

On the AP7 motorway at La Jonquera, near the city of Girona, demonstrators blocked traffic on the two routes connecting Spain and France. Protesters also blocked at least 20 major roads as they marched towards Barcelona for the mass rally with striking workers and students.

The major protest in the centre of Barcelona started at 5:00 p.m. and involved over half a million protesters, according to the police. Under the banners of the separatist trade unions Intersindical-CSC and Intersindical Alternativa, and the slogan "Your rights and freedoms, general strike," hundreds of thousands marched shouting for the freedom of political prisoners, independence and against fascism. Many carried secessionist flags. Over 50,000 demonstrated in the other major Catalan cities of Lleida and Girona.

The demonstrations, however, were not primarily motivated by secessionist sentiment. There is a growing realization among broad layers of the Spanish population that the ruling class is moving rapidly to authoritarian forms of rule.

The draconian decision to imprison politicians for calling peaceful protests, years after the end of the fascist regime of General Francisco Franco, is being met by rising militancy and opposition among workers and youth. The ruling on Monday is an infamous and illegitimate verdict, which creates the precedent for outlawing as "sedition" any form of protest against the state. The ruling was made by a court that is discredited by its recent statements of support for fascist dictator Francisco Franco.

In recent days, tens of thousands of protesters, especially youth, have been involved in clashes with police. As numerous videos now show, many are chanting and throwing insults at the police in Spanish, not Catalan.

The mass protest in Barcelona coincided with a general strike in the region. The strike paralyzed the city. Train metro lines, regional routes and AVE fast-speed services were all affected, even as the regional Catalan government imposed reactionary minimum service requirements of between 25 percent and 50 percent of normal work levels.

In the education sector, over 50 percent of schoolteachers and 90 percent of university staff went on strike. Small shops also closed—72 percent, according to initial data. One third of civil servants went on strike. The port of Barcelona was also affected, as port workers struck against the labour reform and in defence of democratic rights.

The regional Department of Labour stated that electricity consumption dropped by 10.11 percent compared to the day before—a level similar to prior mobilizations such as the strike against the 2010 labour reform and the October 3, 2017 strike after the independence Catalan referendum.

Carmaker SEAT, a unit of Volkswagen AG, which produces 3,500 cars a day, halted production at its plant in Martorell, near Barcelona, from Thursday afternoon until Saturday, over concerns that the marches would disrupt traffic. Iberia cancelled 12 Friday flights between Barcelona and Madrid due to the strike, while Vueling grounded 36 of its scheduled journeys.

In some cases, major businesses promoted the strike. The Bon Preu group of supermarkets and gas stations announced the closure of all its establishments but said it would still pay its workers.

Although the separatist unions and the Catalan regional government called the strike a "success," major sections of the working class—especially significant layers of industrial

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workers—did not participate. For Spanish-speaking sections of the working class in Catalonia, the slogan of the creation of a mini-capitalist Catalan republic, driven by pro-European Union and NATO forces with a long record of imposing social austerity on workers, is viewed with hostility.

Moreover, the Stalinist Workers Commissions (CC.OO) and the social-democratic General Union of Labor (UGT) unions boycotted the event and have refused to call any strikes or solidarity actions.

The ruling Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE) and its ally, the Stalinist-Pabloite Podemos party, are desperate to block a broader movement in the working class against the repressive, antidemocratic acting PSOE government of Pedro Sánchez. Podemos is supporting this government. On Monday, Podemos leader Pablo Iglesias called for people "to respect the law and accept the verdict." He complacently concluded : "It is time for us to roll up our sleeves and work to rebuild bridges between a divided Catalan society and … Spanish society."

On Wednesday, Iglesias met with Sánchez to make clear that he would not oppose any police escalation in Catalonia and even applauded the coordination of the regional Catalan police force and Spanish police forces during the crackdown.

Yesterday, Iglesias denounced youth in Catalonia clashing with police, calling the violence a "disaster" that was "doing a lot of harm" to chances to peacefully resolve the conflict.

In recent days over 100 protesters have been arrested, and clashes between police and protesters have injured over 350. The state has seized on the violent clashes as a pretext to escalate police state measures. So far, 10 protesters have been sent to jail without bail. In four cases, the judge argued that the defendants were trying to "prevent the execution of the final verdict issued by the Supreme Court."

Yesterday, the government also activated the special forces unit of the paramilitary Guardia Civil, the Grupo de Reserva y Seguridad (Reserve and Security Group) unit, which was established in 2006 by the PSOE government. This group, whose stated mission is "the restoration of public order in large mass demonstrations," played an infamous role in crushing the 2012 miners' strike and attacking the 2017 Catalan referendum.

The National Court, descended from the Public Order Court set up by Franco to punish "political crimes," has also ordered the Civil Guards to shut down the website and social media accounts of Tsunami Democràtic, the organisation that has coordinated the protests. The group was behind Monday's attempts to occupy Barcelona airport. National Court Judge Manuel García Castellón has ordered an investigation of this platform for evidence of terrorism.

Fascist forces cultivated by the right-wing atmosphere instigated by the ruling class are also intervening for the first time. On Thursday night, fascist thugs attacked protesters as they ran towards Diagonal Avenue, where the people had gathered. Some of them, wrapped in Spanish fascist flags and armed with baseball bats, shouted "Franco! Franco!" One 23-year-old youth was severely beaten.

Speaking from Brussels after a Council of Europe meeting, acting Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez warned that "rule of law cannot yield to exaltation" and threatened that those responsible for "serious violent acts" would be dealt with "sooner rather than later."

Right-wing parties are calling for Sánchez to remove the Catalan regional government by invoking Article 155 of the constitution. In October 2017, the right-wing Popular Party (PP), with the support of the PSOE, invoked this article, used this power to suspend the democratically elected Catalan regional government and impose elections under the presence of thousands of police forces sent by Madrid.

PP leader Pablo Casado demanded that Sánchez act with "urgency" in Catalonia against riots and compared the situation to the "kale borroka" urban guerrilla operations in the Basque Country in the 1980s and 1990s. The most common actions at the time included attacks on offices of political parties, the burning of cars, attacks on housing, the destruction of ATMs, bank offices and public transport, and rioting using Molotov cocktails.

Madrid has a long record of brutal repression using reactionary antiterror laws against the Basque separatists. Casado effectively called for the use of the same antiterror laws against Catalan protesters.

Citizens Party leader Albert Rivera also urged Sánchez to invoke Article 155 to suspend the elected regional government and to send more police forces. He declared the protests and strike to be "general sabotage to everyday life of Spaniards."

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